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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

POSSIBLE EFFECT OF A RUPTURE OF SINO-SOVIET STATE RELATIONS ON SOVIET AID TO NORTH VIETNAM

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Possible Effect of a Rupture of Sino-Soviet State Relations on Soviet Aid to North Vietnam

Summary

Because of developments in China, the future use by the Soviets of the trans-China route for shipping the great bulk of their military aid to North Vietnam is in doubt. It is possible that, even in the absence of diplomatic relations, Soviet shipments overland would continue, but the Soviets clearly anticipate that they might not. They are now trying to build a case to show that only the Chinese will be to blame if Soviet aid to Hanoi is interrupted.

If this should happen, Moscow would be faced with some difficult decisions, since alternative routes of supply are either risky or logistically unsound. Moscow might seek to temporize and improvise. This could mean shipping some military aid by sea to test the US response and using aircraft, bypassing China, to supply spares and replacements for weapons systems now in North Vietnam. The Russians might hope in this way to avoid more difficult choices: if the Soviets chose to do more they would raise the level of risk for themselves; if they did less, they would be shown up as timid. Faced with this dilemma they would, we believe, take the safer course of limiting their aid.

NOTE: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of Research and Reports and the Office of National Estimates.

1. It is clear from their behavior during the past two weeks that the Chinese would welcome a complete break in state relations with the Russians, provided the Russians can be provoked into taking the initiative. We think that the Russians have been trying to hang on as long as possible because, among other reasons, they foresee that a break might make the transit through China of their military aid to North Vietnam even more difficult than it has been. The Soviets must anticipate that the Chinese, in their present mood, would go so far as to interrupt completely the flow of supplies across China. This development would, at a minimum, oblige Moscow to seek alternative routes of supply, and good ones would not be easy to find. At most, the Russians would have to face up to some painful choices concerning its commitment to Hanoi: whether to refuse to extend this commit- and to urge a political solution to the war on the North Vietnamese; or to seek to sustain North Vietnam and run the risk of confrontation with the US.

2. For overland access to North Vietnam from the USSR, there is no good substitute for China. Possible air routes to Hanoi other than over China (overflying Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, and Laos, for example, or direct from Vladivostok) are somewhat hazardous and, in any event, unfeasible as primary routes of military supply, either for diplomatic or logistical reasons. Nothing short of a massive airlift of unprecedented size could come close to handling the Russian military equipment which now transits China by rail. Even then, various technical and logistics problems would make virtually impossible air shipment of a good portion of this aid. Shipment of arms aid by sea remains the cheapest and easiest method of delivery.

3. A total diplomatic break with the USSR might seem to the Chinese a credible pretext for refusing to allow Moscow to make aid deliveries through China. If the Chinese succeeded in provoking the Russians into severing relations, they would have some grounds for charging that Moscow was responsible for the consequences, including an inability to negotiate transit rights with China. Conceivably, this consideration accounts in part for the unprecedented virulence of Peking's crusade against the USSR. Such a line of argument would, however, not be likely to carry much conviction outside China and especially in embattled Hanoi.

4. Peking obviously begrudges the Soviets such influence in Hanoi as they have achieved with their aid and would prefer to reduce or eliminate the flow if possible. At the same time, the Chinese are vitally interested in seeing Hanoi continue the war and would be in no position to offer to take up the slack. Peking almost certainly realizes that the blocking of the Soviet aid shipments might put a serious strain on Sino-Vietnamese relations and weaken Hanoi's resistance to a political solution. On any rational calculation of its best interests, Peking would probably choose not to run this risk.

5. Even after a complete Sino-Soviet diplomatic break, purely technical contacts could be maintained and existing transit arrangements left virtually intact, for instance, by the North Vietnamese taking delivery at the Sino-Soviet border. Thus, a total rupture of Sino-Soviet relations would not necessarily bring an end to the delivery of Russian military supplies by rail through China, although it would make this possibility more likely and, in any case, give the Chinese better opportunities for harassment.

6. Moscow already seems, though, to be preparing for the worst, and is carefully documenting the record so that the blame can be laid squarely at Peking's door if there is any decline in Russian assistance to Hanoi. On 6 February, Izvestia quoted "the American bourgeois press" to the effect that the Chinese upheaval would probably reduce Hanoi's defensive capability "as a result of obstacles to the transport of Soviet military aid and specialists across the territory of China." [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] Soviet commentary has also exploited Chinese harassment last week of Russian experts going by plane to North Vietnam. Russian propaganda has called this "a double provocation directed against both the Soviet and Vietnamese peoples," and a vivid illustration of how the "anti-Sovietism of the Chinese leaders is turning against the Vietnamese people."

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7. It is doubtful, however, that the Soviets could successfully defend their political and propaganda positions simply by throwing discredit on the Chinese. It would be apparent--not to the Chinese alone--that the USSR has the option of shipping its war materiel to North Vietnam by sea. So far, the evidence shows Moscow has refrained from doing so, and this can only have been in order to avoid the risk of a Soviet-US confrontation on the high seas. If this remained Moscow's policy after the Chinese route was closed, however, the USSR would find itself open to charges of cowardice, and of using the Chinese as a red herring to conceal Moscow's reluctance to face up to the US.

8. Although there has been congestion there from time to time, Haiphong could handle a substantial volume of military shipments without reducing commercial imports. As long as the Soviet role remained mainly one of supporting North Vietnam's military effort with ammunition and spare parts, seaborne delivery could be accomplished without cutting heavily into other types of supply--transport and construction equipment, machinery and food--which also play a vital role in sustaining the war effort. The problem might be complicated if the USSR wished to introduce new weapons systems or to increase substantially the number of MIGs or SAM installations. The delivery of these bulky systems would require an increase in shipping and a more intensive use of port facilities in Haiphong. Almost certainly there would be additional congestion in Haiphong.

9. The Soviets would be under mounting pressure to take the sea route, and they would have to re-examine their policy. We think the Soviet instinct would be to try to improvise rather than meet the problem head on. They might, in these circumstances, attempt to fill the supply gap by shipping military spares by air, over routes which bypass China, and using sea routes for bulkier materials. If this were to be anything more than a token effort, however, the Soviets would need to know very soon whether their use of the sea route for major military shipments was to be challenged. They could be expected to make some tentative probes in order to gauge the US reaction. A sharp reaction would present the Russians with a painful choice: on the one hand, a course

full of political and military hazards for them which could only play into Chinese hands, and, on the other, continued prudence which, in the changed circumstances, would be seen as timidity. Faced with such a clear-cut dilemma, Moscow's leaders might in the end elect to modify their present policy and raise the level of risk. On balance, however, we think they would be more likely to choose the cautious course, to forgo the use of the sea route as the major means of military supply, and to seek to persuade Hanoi that Soviet hands were tied.

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